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Better City, Better Life

May 20, 2009 in Haibao, Shanghai by The China Beat | No comments



By Gina Anne Russo

This month began with the countdown clocks ticking away the time until the start of the 2010 Shanghai Expo hitting the one-year-to-go point, and the weeks that have followed have seen the international press pay a good deal of attention to this upcoming event, which had gotten relatively little media coverage in the Western media. There have been a flurry of op-eds (including [this one by China Beat's Jeff Wasserstrom](#)), reports on the question of whether the U.S. will have a national pavilion (such as this one by [Shanghai Scrap's Adam Minter](#)), and feature stories on the city of Shanghai that highlight the build-up to the Expo (such as [this one in the Washington Post](#)). In addition, while Shanghai-based publications had long been trumpeting its importance, the focus on it in major Chinese national press organs also increased last month, with Beijing Review, for example, devoting several articles to it in a recent Shanghai-themed issue (particularly noteworthy is [this one by Fudan University historian Li Tiangang](#)).

In light of this, we thought this was a good time to ask Gina Anne Russo, a Fulbright scholar based in the city that is gearing up for the Expo, and someone whose "[Gina in Shanghai](#)" blog had caught our attention, to fill our readers in on the publicity campaign under way to whip up enthusiasm for an event that has been called an "Economic Olympics" and also "China's First World's Fair" and will run from May 1-October 31 of 2010. We'll be running her response in two parts, which focus on different aspects of the "Better City, Better Life" slogan that is being used to promote the extravaganza:

Shanghai has had a history of personality cults that permeate the visual landscape of the city. However, today, Mao's presence, ubiquitous only 40 years ago, has all but faded —though you can still find some reminders that he was once omnipresent, such as the big statue of the Chairman that continues to stand on the East China Normal University and the kitsch items for sale at Shanghai souvenir stalls (though these are aimed largely at foreigners). Even the pervasive symbols of American consumerism Colonel Sanders' and Ronald McDonald's are not as common as they once

were—though each of them have some statues as well, standing (the Colonel) or sitting (the clown) near the entrances to venues selling buckets of chicken and Big Macs, respectively. Today, the latest personality to overcome Shanghai's visual landscape is quite different, a symbol of neither Communist Revolution nor capitalist consumer culture. His name is Haibao.

Haibao, a bright blue wave with a face, is in constant public view. His animated likeness looks out at you from TV screen advertisements in subways, his picture looms down on you from the walls of construction zones, his statue is an even more popular photo subject at the Yu Gardens than the Ming architecture, and he is even often seen dancing on a giant LCD screen that moves slowly up and down the Huangpu River on a barge.

His cult of personality displaces all others, including those of the Olympic Friendlies (not so last year) and Barbie (whose pink allure is celebrated in the city now that it is home to the world's first megastore devoted to the doll), and he brings with him a simple message: the World Expo is coming to Shanghai, and with it a new chance for Shanghai to become internationally recognized as China's most progressive and global city. The important word in that last statement, the one that draws the distinction between the message of the Expo and of the Olympics (mega-events that have been linked in various ways, including similar roles for countdown clocks and promotional videos featuring Jackie Chan), is the word "city," not "country," and this distinction illustrates a lot of underlying issues regarding Shanghai's own self understanding.

The slogans for both events, the Olympics and the Expo, illuminate this distinction. Whereas the Olympic slogan reads "One world, one dream," connecting China to a world of nations, the Expo slogan reads "Better city, better life," putting Shanghai on the map of globalized cities, not countries. Creating this type of identity for Shanghai is not difficult either, as Shanghai historically has always seen itself as connected, yet separate, from the rest of China, a gateway through which China connects with the rest of the modern world.

This is similarly emphasized in academic discourse. It is no accident that many books about China's search for modernization are almost entirely concerned with Shanghai and present the city's modern history as unique (though other treaty-ports sometimes get a look in as well). Leo Ou-fan Lee and Yeh Wen-hsin, along with countless others, have demonstrated that Shanghai was the birthplace of the modern Chinese nation because of its unique cultural connection with the outside world at the beginning of the twentieth century.

I did my senior thesis research about the magazine *Ling Long*, a Shanghaiwomen's magazine from the 1930s. The layout and message of this magazine very clearly demonstrated the way that modern people, specifically modern women, should look and act. These modern Shanghaiers lived a unique lifestyle of "East meets West," a lifestyle that could be lived in Shanghai but no other Chinese metropolis. At the same time, Shanghai's city landscape and unique institutions gave way to this lifestyle, and also fed the belief among Shanghai people that they were the leaders of the modern world in China, and even in Asia as a whole.



The current campaigns for the Expo play upon this Shanghainese notion that it is the center of Chinese urban modernity. One particular advertisement that seems to run on constant replay on twenty meter high screens on the sides of skyscrapers depicts Haibao's journey through China. He first stops in Yunnan where he is greeted by the Miao people, in traditional costume (the Miao costume includes a very large and distinct white and red headress), who offer him local gifts. He then moves onto Xinjiang, where Uigher girls in flowing country dresses offer him grapes (a regional specialty) and play traditional Uigher instruments around him as he smiles and dances. Then, suddenly, we see a man in a light cotton button up shirt and slacks and a girl in a Western sundress, and they run along a road lined with modern skyscrapers and they take pictures of Haibao with their digital cameras.

The distinction between the "traditional" and "modern" is accentuated by the fact that our modern Shanghairen (Shanghainese) actually watch the "traditional" scenes on a TV screen on a skyscraper (where, in real life, this whole advertisement is played), making the "traditional" elements seem like a movie, not the real and modern Chinese world (in Shanghai). This advertisement sends a clear message: Shanghai is the end of the natural progression from traditional to modern, and therefore the logical place for the world Expo—the contemporary counterpart to the World's Fairs of old, the first of which were held in London and Paris when those cities represented state-of-the-art modernity.



Furthermore, while also making the dichotomy between a traditional lifestyle and a “modern” lifestyle, the advertisement also implies that all of China’s elements, its diversity, celebrates Shanghai’s greatness. The advertisement actually ends not in Shanghai, but in Hong Kong, as Hong Kong people wave and welcome Haibao. While this could be interpreted in many different ways, what it seems to symbolize in this context is Hong Kong recognizing Shanghai as the new urban center of China, just as all of China’s different minorities recognize it as well. In a sense, there are many forces at play here: the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, the stark contrast between China’s minorities and Shanghai’s urban elite, and even competition among China’s urban centers. But as all of these places and peoples greet Haibao, they are in fact greeting Shanghai’s coming of age. China is essentially centered around Shanghai.

To be continued in Part II.

Tags: [Global Shanghai](#), [Haibao](#), [Shanghai](#), [Shanghai Expo 2010](#)